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The Numerology of Dante's Divine Vision

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A major theme of *The Divine Comedy* is the problem of the relationship between the finite and infinite, a problem that receives its ultimate expression at the end of the poem in the protagonist's attempt to understand the mystery of the Incarnation. In this note, I will point out a new way of looking at the reconciliation of the finite and infinite: the relationship of the numbers four and three. These numbers had special significance in Dante's time. The number four was the number of the world, of the material—the four seasons, the four directions, and, especially, the four elements. The number three was the number of God, a number Dante emphasizes throughout his poem, especially at the end of *Paradiso* in the description of the triple rainbow representing the three persons of the Trinity (33.115–20).[1]

One key linking of these significant numbers in the conclusion of the *Commedia* occurs in the image of the universe as a book bound by love.

> Nel suo profondo vidi che s'interna,
> legato con amore in un volume,
> ciò che per l'universo si squaderna.
>
> In its depth I saw contained,
> by love into a single volume bound,
> the pages scattered through the universe. (*Paradiso* 33.85–87)

As Singleton remarks, in the opening line of this passage the choice of the verb *s'interna* may "reflect the Trinity or triune Godhead, a *terno* ['triple']." And, as he

goes on to point out, if it is possible to see the number three in *s'interna* 'contained within itself,' it is equally possible to see the number four in the word *squaderna* (literally, "scattered as individual quartos"—the four-times-folded fascicules that were sewn together to form a book; see Ahern). That the two numbers are related by the rhyme words of the framing lines of the tercet is particularly ingenious because the pairing precisely embodies the meaning of the image itself: everything in nature—all material things, plants, animals, human beings (4)—are contained in, bound together in, God (3).

Bringing three and four into connection through rhyme seems to be unique in the *Commedia* to the passage just discussed. Of course, there are other possibilities. One is to add the numbers: $4 + 3 = 7$, a very significant number. Yet another way is to multiply them: $4 \times 3 = 12$, another significant number (see Guzzardo 129–131, 136–38). However, a further way of relating the numbers that has not been sufficiently studied with regard to Dante's poem is raising each number to the other's power: $3^4 = 81$, and $4^3 = 64$.[2]

The pilgrim narrator's first direct vision of God—the purpose of his entire journey—culminates in the eighty-first line of *Paradiso* 33. As Dante attempts to penetrate the "ray / of the exalted light" (54–55), he says he feels he would be lost were he to turn away from its brightness:

> E' mi ricorda ch'io fui più ardito
> per questo a sostener, tanto ch'i' giunsi
> l'aspetto mio col valore infinito.
>
> And I remember that, on this account
> I grew more bold and thus sustained my gaze
> until I reached the Goodness that is infinite. (79–81)

Singleton recognizes the significance of the line number: "The upward movement through the ray of light has finally reached its goal, as a verse numbered eighty-one declares! (In medieval numerology it is expected that the digits be added together, and nine is the number of miracle, as every reader of the *Vita nuova* knows.)" Since only one tercet separates this passage from the linking of four and three in the book image, a further significance of the line number seems clear. Eighty-one is the fourth power of three, and this mathematical linking can be seen as an additional representation of the union of human and divine (*giunsi* means "reached" but also "was joined with").[3]

Since the tercet ending in line 81 of the *Commedia*'s last canto is "the plain and clear center" of the other descriptions of the poet's divine vision (Momigliano), we should not be surprised to find numerical foreshadowings of this passage of the

poem in the descriptions of Dante's encounters with two earlier representatives of divine grace, Virgil and Beatrice.

In the meeting with Virgil there is a preparation for the moment of actual vision, allowing the character to make a majestic entrance into the poem. As Dante is blocked in his attempt to climb the mountain in the first canto of the *Inferno*, and is forced back into the valley, Virgil is at first vaguely identified as "one" who "offered himself" to the poet's eyes ("dinanzi a li occhi me si fu offerto / chi . . . " [62–63]). Only in line 64 (4^3) does Dante actively see (*vidi*) Virgil ("Quando vidi costui nel gran diserto"). In a similar way, Beatrice in the Garden of Eden is at first only vaguely and passively perceived as "a lady" who appears to Dante ("donna m'apparve" [*Purgatorio* 30.32]). Because she is veiled by her headdress and by a shower of flowers thrown by admiring angels (28–31), Dante "could not see her with [his] eyes" (37) and feels only her "hidden force" (38). However, once again in a line significantly numbered 64 (and in the sixty-fourth canto of the poem), only after Beatrice calls his name and fixes her attention on him does Dante finally see (*vidi*) his beloved ("vidi la donna che pria m'appario").[4]

The appearances of Virgil and Beatrice constitute two contacts with the divine that anticipate the culminating union of Dante's vision with God's in line 81 of *Paradiso* 33. By a mathematical operation on *four* (the human) involving *three* (the divine), Dante makes Virgil and Beatrice representatives of God (4^3). Likewise, by an operation on *three* (the divine) involving *four* (the human), he represents the divine becoming human, thus figuring the supreme Christian mystery of the Incarnation (3^4). Human initiative is seen in the characters of Virgil and Beatrice and divine initiative in the final canto of the poem.[5] As Hardt puts it, Dante inscribes his *Commedia* with such significant numbers to "constitute an inner sphere of the poem which is not addressed to the reader, but rather to God himself" (93).

Notes

[1]For the usual significance of the numbers four and three, see Kaske (164) and sources he lists thereafter.

[2]That Dante was aware of the potential significance of the powers of numbers is attested by his linking of Beatrice with the number nine in the *Vita nuova.* "She was a nine, or a miracle, whose root [*radice*] . . . is the miraculous Trinity itself" (29.3). Also, the one hundred cantos of the *Comedy* are usually understood as symbolizing totality or perfection because one hundred is the square of ten, "the perfect number" ("*lo perfetto numero*"; *Vita nuova* 29.1). English quotations of this work come from Musa, Italian from Barbi.

[3]That $81 = 3^4$ was pointed out to me by Hai Yang in a 2005 undergraduate class on Dante at Peking University.

[4]Although he actively sees Beatrice in line 64, Dante still insists that the veil (which is not removed until the end of Canto 30) does not allow him completely "unrestricted" sight of her full face (67–69).

[5]Herzmann and Towsley, who exhaustively argue that the problem of squaring the circle can be seen as an expression of the poem's central problem of reconciling finite and infinite, reach a similar conclusion: "Dante is the square that has been circled. The difference between squaring the circle and circling the square is precisely the difference between human initiative and divine" (115). Another example of Dante's linking of a geometrical concept to numerological symbolism is the *tetragono* ("foursquare") image of *Paradiso* 17.24 (see Raffa 164–78).

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